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ABSTRACT

Ninety-seven new residents entering five randomly selected residence halls at the University of Maryland, College Park, completed a questionnaire on their first impressions (2 to 4 weeks) of their dorm and changes they would like to see. Fifty-six had never lived in a residence hall before and 44% had, and 59% did not know anyone on their floor before moving in. When asked what they liked most about dorms so far, 20% said people's friendliness, 17% said the people they met and 16% said the convenient location. When asked what they least liked, 19% reported insufficient or malfunctioning physical facilities and 14% said undesirable physical aspects of their rooms. Nineteen percent gave unsolicited comments that they wish they had gotten more help from their Resident Assistant and only 5% indicated they would seek out their Resident Assistant for help as a first step. In addition, 8% said they had negative impressions of the residence halls due to impersonal treatment before moving in. Intercorrelations among attitude items indicate that those who exhibit public conformity and private disagreement with residence hall norms tend to feel less positive and have adjusted less well to their new situation. Results were discussed in terms of the theory that satisfiers stem from variables intrinsic to dorm life (e.g., other people, hall programs) and dissatisfiers stem from extrinsic variables (e.g., physical facilities). It was suggested that a good residence hall program treats these sources independently. Overall it was recommended that greater emphasis be given to initiating residence hall programs before students move in. (Author)

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SUMMARY

97 new residents entering five randomly selected residence halls at the University of Maryland, College Park, completed a questionnaire on their first impressions (2 to 4 weeks) of their dorm and changes they would like to see. 56% had never lived in a residence hall before and 44% had, and 59% did not know anyone on their floor before moving in. When asked what they liked most about the dorms so far, 20% said people's friendliness, 17% said they people they met and 16% said the convenient location. When asked what they least liked, 19% reported insufficient or malfunctioning physical facilities and 14% said undesirable physical aspects of their rooms. 19% gave unsolicited comments that they wish they had gotten more help from their Resident Assistant and only 5% indicated they would seek out their Resident Assistant for help as a first step. In addition, 8% said they had negative impressions of the residence halls due to impersonal treatment before moving in. Intercorrelations among attitude items indicate that those who exhibit public conformity and private disagreement with residence hall norms tend to feel less positive and have adjusted less well to their new situation. Results were discussed in terms of the theory that satisfiers stem from variables intrinsic to dorm life (e.g., other people, hall programs) and dissatisfiers stem from extrinsic variables (e.g., physical facilities). It was suggested that a good residence hall program treats these sources independently. Overall it was recommended that greater emphasis be given to initiating residence hall programs before students move in.

At the beginning of a second semester or term many students begin life in a new residence hall. Most students have been living there for a semester or more. Hence the newcomer is entering an already established group with its own patterns of interaction, norms and roles. Emphasis in most student programs is put on the student entering in the fall term and students changing their living patterns or programs during midyear are often "forgotten" and have a tendency to "slip through the cracks". As more and more students choose educational patterns other than beginning school the fall after they graduate high school, it is worth examining the attitudes, needs and interests of such students.

The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to explore some of the initial reactions and perceptions of midyear newcomers to the residence halls and (2) to test some hypotheses regarding the relationship of the newcomer to the group. It should be emphasized that a group does not have set norms or values on all its activities. This is particularly true of an informal group which probably characterizes most residence hall situations. Group norms develop as a result of interaction in a group setting and once such norms develop, there are pressures toward conformity. Berkowitz (1965) distinguishes among four types of conformity: (1) Public conformity and private agreement, (2) Public conformity and private disagreement, (3) Public nonconformity and private agreement and (4) Public nonconformity and private disagreement.

A number of studies have shown that there is a direct relationship between group attractiveness and conformity. That is, the more a group, and membership in it, is attractive and liked by a member, the more the tendency toward public conformity and private agreement. Similarly the less attractive the group to an individual the more the tendency toward public conformity and private disagreement. (Schacter,1951; Bovard, 1951; Gerald, 1954; Berkowitz, 1954; Lott and Lott, 1961).

Procedure

A 20 item questionnaire concerning background information, initial reactions to the residence hall, and conformity was administered to the new residents in the spring semester in five randomly selected residence halls on the College Park Campus of the University of Maryland, from 2 to 4 weeks after they moved in. Resident Directors of the halls were briefed on the study and distributed materials to the new residents. New residents returned the questionnaires directly to the Counseling Center research office in envelopes provided. Questionnaires were completed anonymously but subjects returned postcards separately identifying themselves as having completed the questionnaire. Telephone and direct contact followups resulted in a 75% return rate (N = 97). Responses were analyzed using percentages and Pearson correlation.

Results

The sample was 51% freshmen, 32% sophomores, 13% juniors and 4% seniors; 65% female and 35% male; 56% had never lived in a residence hall previously and 44% had. Most new residents did not know anyone on their floor before moving in (59%), while 24% knew 1 to 3 people, 13% knew 4 to 7, and 4% knew 8 or more people before moving in. When asked what they liked most about

their hall so far, 20% said people's friendliness, 17% said the people they met and 16% said the convenient location of the dorm. When asked what they liked least about their hall so far, 19% reported insufficient, malfunctioning or lack of physical facilities such as laundry machines, dryers, cooking facilities, phones, etc. Eighteen percent noted the amount of noise as what they liked least, 14% reported undesirable physical aspects of their room or hall, and 7% complained about unclean bathrooms as what they liked least.

When asked what had been most helpful to their adjustment to residence hall living, 24% reported the people on their floor, 14% said their roommate, 13% said a particular person or friend and 12% noted the general friendliness of people. However, when students were asked where they would go first to seek help or advice, 22% said a friend off campus, 18% said a friend on campus but outside the dorm, 18% said parents, 16% said roommate, 13% said someone on their floor and 5% said their Resident Assistant. Interestingly, though not a specific question, 19% reported that they wished they had had more aid from their Resident Assistant when they first moved in and 8% reported that their first impressions of the dorm were negatively affected by the impersonalized contact they had through the mail regarding their housing.

A number of interesting correlations among the items developed. For instance item 13 was stated; "I go along with things I don't like on my floor," which would indicate public conformity and private disagreement. Correlations with item 13 which were significant at the .05 level showed that those who showed public conformity and private disagreement tended to: have lower family incomes ($r = .27$); feel the atmosphere on the floor was unfriendly ($r = .23$); not get along with others on the floor ($r = .22$); feel disagreeable things occurred on the floor ($r = .29$); but expected to be more popular on the floor in the future ($r = .20$).

Item 15 stated; "I prefer my present dorm to any other". Significant correlations (.05 level) with item 15 indicated that those who preferred their present dorm tended to: feel a part of things on the floor ($r = .23$) and in the entire residence hall ($r = .34$); feel more popular with those on their floor ($r = .31$); and to know more people on the floor before they moved in ($r = .28$). The more people the new residents knew before they moved in, the more likely (.05 level) they were to: feel the atmosphere on their floor was friendly ($r = .23$), and to feel a part of things on their floor ($r = .25$).

There were no significant differences between male and female responses to the questionnaire.

Discussion

The results generally agree with past research in that those who exhibit public conformity and private disagreement with residence hall norms tend to feel less positive and have adjusted less well to their new situation. The issue then becomes how do we deal with new midyear students in a residence hall program. Several important clues to this were found in the study. Nineteen percent of the students gave unsolicited comments that they wish they had gotten more help from their Resident Assistant when they first moved in, and only 5% indicated they would seek out their Resident Assistant

for help as a first step. In addition an unsolicited 8% said they had negative first impressions of the residence hall due to the impersonal initial contacts they had had with the housing office. It could be that in many residence hall programs, the emphasis is on student development programs after an initial "settling in" period. The rush of assigning rooms and taking care of administrative details often dominates housing staff time early in a semester. But we also know from research in social psychology that "first impressions" may be most important in determining attractiveness and commitment in a group (Asch, 1946). Thus it may be much more important that housing staff initiate their programs immediately upon the students' entry into the residence hall. Indeed it may be even more important to have the program begin before the student enters the dorm. This may be particularly practical at midyear when many new residents were enrolled in school in the fall and available for an orientation program.

Another interesting point was the nature of student satisfactions and dissatisfactions with their dorms in the first few weeks. Satisfiers tended to deal with interpersonal variables such as friendliness in general or of a particular person. Dissatisfiers tended to deal with physical environmental issues such as plumbing, cooking and laundry facilities, etc. Herzberg, Mausner and Snyderman (1959) have developed a theory of job satisfaction which has been criticized by many but seems to explain some of the results of this study. Herzberg et. al. stated that satisfiers relate to the intrinsic aspects of a job such as the work itself and relations with coworkers. In contrast dissatisfiers relate to extrinsic aspects of a job including physical surroundings and work environment. Herzberg et. al. feel that people cannot get dissatisfaction from a satisfier or satisfaction from a dissatisfier. If satisfiers are not present, a kind of neutrality exists but not dissatisfaction. Conversely, if dissatisfiers are not present, neutrality rather than satisfaction ensues. If both satisfiers and dissatisfiers are present, a mixed reaction to the situation exists. This analysis may be useful to those working in residence halls. As student personnel work in housing moved from a caretaker concern for the physical aspects of residence hall living (dealing with dissatisfiers) to a more humanistic concern for student development (dealing with satisfiers), it may be important to recognize that a good housing program must deal with both: it should seek to maximize satisfiers and minimize dissatisfiers. The theory of Herzberg et. al. may help explain some of the mystery and frustration that accrues to housing staff when they feel that they have a good development program going and hence are shocked at student outrage on physical environment variables. Housing staff should expect students to complain about physical conditions in the dorm as they do about food in the cafeteria, and to give praise on interpersonal assistance given. A good housing staff member will take both seriously and recognize that they represent independent messages.

Thus there would seem to be much that housing staff could do to help the new student in the residence halls. This study suggests that carefully planned programs initiated before the new student moves in could be very effective.

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